



THE ROAD TO REDEMPTION



HIKING AN ANCIENT PILGRIM PATH CAN BE A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF PERSONAL DISCOVERY. OR IT CAN JUST BE AN INTERESTING WALK THROUGH THE SPANISH COUNTRYSIDE

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PREVIOUS PAGES: The casket in Santiago Cathedral said to hold the bones of St James; hikers on the trail; a yellow shell and arrow mark the path; Celtic carvings on a church door; 9th-century church in Oviedo; a pilgrim's staff.
 LEFT: The marker stone welcomed by every pilgrim – just 100km left to walk. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Messages scrawled inside a tiny roadside shrine; graveyard at Luarca; photographer Sally Tagg is helped across a tricky spot; church door in Sarria; “breast” cheese on sale in Santiago; Madonna at Luarca; remains of a pre-Roman village and ancient two-metre-tall granite sun disc at Coaña; Celtic cross at Luarca.

WE WALKED. And walked. And walked. Every day we ticked off another 22kms or so. With eight other New Zealanders I was doing what thousands, in fact millions, of others have done as we hiked the Camino. One of the world's oldest pilgrimage trails, it threads a narrow path across the top of Spain to the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. How can one not be drawn to such a romantic name – St James of the Star Field? It sounds so lovely.

But while “lovely” may be a handy tag for an easy stroll in the Spanish countryside, the Camino – also sometimes called The Way or The Road – is not something you can label with easy adjectives. Extraordinary, maybe. Along with, by turns, testing and rewarding, debilitating and delicious, hard and hilarious. Ask any walker how it was for them and they'll all have a different answer. Some might describe it as just a bracing and interesting hike, a look at another culture or a food and wine experience (Galician stew and cider, octopus and vino blanco) and it is all of those things. But everyone who attacks The Road brings to it their own mindset and expectations. And therein – despite the blisters, aching muscles, alternating bouts of tedium and delirium, blazing sun and drenching rain – lies the Camino's allure.

In the early days of Christianity there were three major pilgrimages Europeans could go on to prove their devotion or to take time out to ponder life. They led to either Rome, Jerusalem or the old city of Santiago in Spain's north-west corner. Why there? Well, the story goes that the bones of St James are interred there. One of the 12 disciples, James was beheaded by Herod and his body taken by boat to Finisterre in Spain where the bones moulderred, undiscovered, until a shepherd was drawn to the burial spot by a bright and shining star. Now the remains lie (they say) in a silver casket you can file past in Santiago Cathedral.

Early pilgrims who walked there wore a scallop shell on their hat or cape. So in the 21st century, on day one of our walk, our little band from Down Under – not conspicuously spiritual but keen for an adventure – was busy attaching shells to our Kathmandu backpacks. Really, we were a bunch of softies. Serious pilgrims begin in France, starting from as far away as Paris. Hardy hikers can spend months covering 800 kilometres on foot, bunking in rough roadside hostels (albergues) for just five euros or so per night, putting up with snores, smells and inadequate bathrooms and having to keep a keen eye on their valuables.

My group was taking a much shorter Celtic Route – a 12-day tour organized by Sharon Breslin of Lifestyle Journeys in Wellington. Sharon specializes in putting together trips for people who seek a different sort of travel experience. So, along with local tour guide Richard Guggenheimer, she conjured up a route which would take us along coastal cliffs and through forested valleys, with stopovers in fishing villages, before heading inland to join up with the main Camino route. Our walk, during which we covered a mere 180km, was cushy compared with the full-scale version. You could call it Camino Lite. No cramped hostels for us. After seven hours or so of trekking we could fall into fragrant sheets in lovely 16th-century hotels and elegant country homes after being plied with tasty Spanish food and jugs of summer wine (light local red tempered with a splash of lemon spritzer). There were even vehicles to carry our heavy stuff so that all we needed to tote was a backpack for water, hat, sunnies, camera and coat.

Sounds easy. Wasn't. Well, not for me. Guess who didn't train hard enough? Guess who didn't break in her shoes properly? Guess whose feet bloomed with big blisters? And guess who cheated a little by accepting a couple of lifts in the car when her feet were throbbing too much to take her further? Guilty of all that, I was always last, always slowest, and in awe of the fit 70-year-olds in the group who strode easily away from me each morning. But the Camino has its way with you mentally as well as physically. It stretches you, wrestles with you, wipes out your mind's everyday prattle, gives you time to muse on personal issues that in ordinary life it is easier to ignore. As the slowcoach, I walked alone most days and even got lost when I missed one of the yellow arrows daubed on walls and trees to help keep pilgrims on the path.

There were sweaty times when I thought “what the hell am I doing this for?” But gradually I came to appreciate how much I had needed to slow down, to take time to breathe and just “be” and now I had to. There was nothing for it but to move at my own pace and look, really look, at the world. There were quiet mossy glades to calm me, jaunty brown squirrels to make me laugh, large loose dogs to (briefly) spook me and a stream of cheerful travellers calling out the common good-luck cry, “Buen Camino!” It was like time-travel too, passing factories and farms where people were working at ordinary jobs while I was deep in my little bubble of medieval experience. ▶



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Santiago's baroque cathedral, often called "a symphony in stone", is the scene of solemn Catholic rituals inside and vivid street festivals outside.

For Lindsey's top five contemplative reads, visit our website.

Even in the cellphone age, the Camino offers time for more personal messages. The names Libbie and Katia were spelt out in sticks on one dusty path (it turned out to be the work of two Kiwi girls). Some Spaniard had scribbled "a casa di puta" on a drab tunnel wall. Some pilgrims, it seems, need brothels as well as bars along the way. But you're just as likely to fall into step with ascetic, silent types merely seeking a spiritual high.

Everyone who writes about *The Road* (such as Paulo Coelho in *The Pilgrimage* and Shirley MacLaine in *The Camino*) muses on its import. Coelho was told by his guide: "When you are moving toward an objective, it is very important to pay attention to the road ... the road enriches us as we walk its length. You can compare it to the

sexual relationship; the caresses of foreplay determine the intensity of the orgasm. Everyone knows that." Well ... okay. Sex seemed very much on the mind of a weather-beaten German pilgrim I met one day. Bra-less and all a-jiggle in a yellow T-shirt, she told me how she'd been overwhelmed in midlife to find new love with a woman rather than a man. I wasn't keen on another intimate chat but at our next encounter she merely asked where my friends were. "Up ahead," I sighed. "I'm always last." "It doesn't matter," she said. "This is The Way, not a race. We all have our own tempo. We must live in the moment."

Spain, or at least its north-west edge, surprised me with its greenness. This Atlantic corner, with its maritime climate, is lush dairying country. It's also alive with blue gums. An early Spanish missionary to Australia brought seedlings back home with him; now eucalyptus forest covers miles of land and is harvested for paper-making. We walked through it almost every day. Another surprise: the history. Links run strong between ancient Britain and northern Spain and the local music is not flamenco but bagpipe. The landscape turns up both 1000-year-old churches and ancient Celtic ruins.

The Camino is, at heart, a Catholic experience. At the end, provided you can show a Camino "passport" stamped at designated spots along the way – thus proving you have indeed walked at least 100km to the cathedral – a nice clerk in the office there will give you a pretty certificate. Nobody asks, or cares, whether you're Catholic. I didn't want one at first. It seemed a bit childish, like leaving school camp with a "well done" sticker. But I'm proud of it now. It reminds me of the moment when we finally made it.

Chilly rain pelted down as we splashed through the noisy streets of modern Santiago and in through an ancient stone tunnel, past the echoing drone of a busking bagpiper, to find ourselves in a vast, flagstoned square. Before us rose the insanely baroque face of the old cathedral, lavish with stone lacework, statues and fairy-tale towers. Out with the cameras! Smile! The photos show us looking relieved, washed clean, elated to be there in our dripping coats and ponchos. All that remained was to claim those certificates and head for a hotel. Satisfied to the max, every part of me now yearned for a very long, hot bath, followed by the dumping of my smelly shoes – and a celebration dinner at the best tapas bar we could find. *Sharon Breslin runs two different Camino trips each year. For more information, visit www.lifestylejourneys.co.nz*

NOTEBOOK

How long is it? As long as you want it to be. Purists walk 800km, starting off in France. In order to earn a Camino-completion certificate from the cathedral at Santiago, you must trek at least 100km.

What's the best time to go? Spring or autumn, to avoid the blazing heat or damp chill of the other seasons.

What accommodation is there? You can stay in refugios (guest houses) on the trail for just a few euros per night. They are spartan but you do get to meet people. Alternatively, book with a travel company like Lifestyle Journeys of Wellington and go the three-star way, bedding down in country farmhouses or family-run pazos, Galician manor homes with charm and character.

What should I take? As little as possible. Go to specialist tramping stores such as Kathmandu for light, quick-drying clothing and nifty equipment such as collapsible walking sticks that will fit in a suitcase. Cheap wooden staffs can be bought in Spain. Hats and rainwear are essential. Thin plastic ponchos aren't glamorous but work really well. Take plenty of socks and maybe some well-worn sandals to give your feet a change of footwear

when the terrain is easy.

How far do I walk each day?

Anywhere between 15 and 25 km, taking five or six hours. The narrow, winding trail is marked by yellow-painted arrows or scallop-shell tiles on stone markers. There are hills. Some of it is paved, some of it is stony.

What's the best preparation? Walk.

A lot. To avoid blisters, use the shoes or boots you'll be wearing on the Camino. For weeks before departure, walk at least every second day for an hour or more and make sure you do a few long walks (of five or six hours' duration, with a day pack), taking rest breaks as you need them and stopping for lunch, as you'll do on the Camino.

What will it cost? Lifestyle Journeys offers two different routes: the French Camino, which takes the more traditional inland path, costs 2640 euros; the Celtic Camino, including Atlantic coastal paths and villages, costs 2760 euros. Both take 13 days, 12 nights. Airfares are not included in the price. Included are the services of two experienced guides, twin-share accommodation, all meals (including wine with dinner), private transport and carrying of luggage, entrance fees into historic sites and a tour of the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela.